THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

IF I SHOULD DIE BEFORE I WAKE

November 1, 1998
John M. Buchanan

We are fearful people. Fear takes away our freedom and gives our society the power to manipulate us with threats and promises. When we can reach beyond our fears to the One who loves us with a love that was there before we were born and will be there after we die then oppression, persecution, even death will be unable to take our freedom. Once we have come to the deep inner knowledge—a knowledge more of the heart than the mind—that we are born out of love and will die into love, that this love is our true Father and Mother, then all forms of evil, illness and death lose their final power over us.

Henri J. M. Nouwen
Our Greatest Gift

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IF I SHOULD BEFORE I WAKE
November 1, 1998

John 14:1-4

"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more." Revelation 21:4

Dear God, We have come to hear the word you have for us. We confess that sometimes we are so busy, and life is so noisy, and we are so distracted, that we long for this silence, these moments sitting here together on Sunday morning. So, come into this silence. Make it your own. Speak to us in it. And give us the capacity, the faith, to hear what you are saying to us—about who you are and who we are and who you want us to be. In Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

The bedtime ritual in my childhood never varied. In fact, it is so deep in my own soul that it surfaces and I rehearse it mentally on occasion as I drift to sleep even now.

> "Now I lay me down to sleep,
> I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
> If I should die before I wake,
> I pray the Lord my soul to take."

One parent or the other was there and there always followed a recitation of blessing:

> God bless Mommy, Daddy, Billy, grandparents on both sides, aunts, uncles, Uncle Jack in the Pacific who did not come home, Bobby who did, Uncle Frank in Europe who did not, Frankie who did, an occasional neighbor or friend who needed a little extra help. On occasion, when I could, I tried to slip in the Pittsburgh Pirates, at least silently.

It was, of course, a small All Saints celebration. For more than a thousand years, the Christian church has remembered and given God thanks, on November 1, "for all the saints who from their labors rest." Not stained-glass window saints, by the way, but all the saints. I love the way Dean Lueking, Lutheran pastor and good friend, defined saints in a recent essay. "Saints are not celebrities," he said. "Saints are "forgiven sinners, who know it, act upon it, and live by grace without angling for stained-glass window status" (*The Christian Century*, 10/21/98, "Saints in the Making"). Saints, Lueking says, are urban public school teachers, hospital emergency room nurses, dedicated spouses and parents, nursing home workers, volunteers, tutors—forgiven sinners who live by grace.

Saints also are your balcony people—the people now gone who have influenced and inspired you and helped form your faith and values. All Saints is the day to walk out in the front yard, look up to your balcony, and wave at your saints.

So my earliest prayer concluded with a recitation of saints. And it was also, I now understand, a theological affirmation of amazing proportions.

When I went to Divinity School and learned not only some very big words, but also a little child psychology, I decided that my first childhood prayer actually was pretty frightening. "If I should die before I wake." What a thought to leave with a child drifting off into dreamland. Now, I've changed my mind. Harvard psychologist Robert Coles has reminded us that children have a wonderful capacity for assimilating big ideas, and are not nearly as fixated on the fear of death, for instance, as we think they must be. In fact, I do not recall ever lying on my bed fretting about the possibility that I might die before I woke. But I do know that the faith affirmation made in that childhood prayer is one I now gladly reclaim and make for myself.

The late Henri Nouwen, not long before his own untimely death, wrote a wonderful little book, *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Death and Dying*, prompted by the death of a resident of the L'Arche Community, where Nouwen was working. Nouwen urges us to befriend our own death, "We can live as if this life were all we had, as if death were absurd and we better not talk about it, or we can choose to claim our divine childhood . . . becoming a child—entering a second childhood is essential to dying a good death."

The topic is not easy. The Bible does not have a whole lot to say about what happens to us. In fact, the Bible has a whole lot less to say than the preachers who, Reinhold Niebuhr once quipped, "seem to know everything there is to know about the furniture of heaven, the temperature of hell, and the guest list of both places." There is an internal wisdom in the Bible, it seems, that wants to leave this matter of what happens to us when we die to faith; a sense that if it were all crystal clear, something of the joy, meaning, and purpose of life would be lost. Life and how we live it is the point of the Bible—life and how to treasure it and love it and live it fully.

One New Testament scholar says about our texts this morning—"In my Father's house are many dwelling places," and, "He will wipe away my tears. Death will be no more"—that those texts are easier to read than preach. They bring out the banal in the preacher, which is why they are ignored except at funerals when we all hurry to read, hear, embrace, and stand beneath their assurance.

The context in both cases is critical. "In my Father's house" comes at the end, when Jesus is about to be arrested and crucified. The disciples do not know what is to become of him or themselves. His words are minimal, but reassuring . . . "in my Father's house are many rooms. Do not be afraid." The beautiful words from Revelation were written by an old man in the midst of one of the fiercest, cruelest periods of persecution the Christian church has ever experienced. Old John was a political prisoner on the Island of Patmos. You can visit his cell, see where he was chained to the rocks, look out his small window and see the unspeakably beautiful blue Mediterranean Sea and sky that he looked out at as he addressed tiny, vulnerable Christian churches under siege, their numbers decimated by political arrests and public executions, their very existence in grave doubt before the invincible and hostile power of Rome. "God will wipe away every tear. Death will be no more."

Sometimes the preacher can't do justice to it and reverts to the banal cliches. Sometimes we ignore it. And sometimes—sooner than later, in fact—we cannot . . . when life jolts us with a reminder of our mortality, when someone we love dies.

Ronald Thiemann is the Dean of the Divinity School at Harvard, an academic's academic, a theologian, a scholar. Both of his parents lived into their eighties and both died recently, and Thiemann has given us the gift of his own reflection. He writes, "How are we to interpret my father's simple faith that he would be reunited with his father beyond the grave?" (Thiemann's grandfather had died when his father was two.) On his deathbed, his father had said he wanted, "so much to see my father and catch up on all that I have missed." "How are we to understand my mother's ability to face death with life-affirming humor?" (Deathbed humor—what an oxymoron—yet, not uncommon. Oscar Wilde, it is said, on his deathbed in a Paris hotel, opened one eye, looked around, and said, "Either this wallpaper goes or I do.") Thiemann's mother, on her deathbed, told him he was a "nearly perfect son," but paused, and added with a twinkle in her eye, "but of course I don't know what you do in your free time." —oops - he was fired fr. Dean Harvard for porn on computer

Thiemann asks, "Are these merely the naïve acts of simple, uneducated folk, or do they possess a meaning that demands our serious theological attention?"

Thiemann, the theologian, takes very seriously the faith affirmation, the trust that cannot always be reduced to theological categories. For the Christian, he reminds us, questions of personal destiny are wrapped up in what we believe about Jesus' destiny. "He, we believe, is the way, the truth, and the life. We trust him with our lives . . . . We follow him into this world knowing that suffering, despair, and death are not the final word spoken about us" (see *Context*, Martin E. Marty, September 19, 1998).

Douglas John Hall, another academic theologian, agrees. Near the end of the third and final volume of his major theological works, Hall writes that even scholars are driven to wonder "what will become of me." It is not only the little child who wants to know, 'What happened to Grandma? Where is she now?' The child lives on in the adult and perhaps more insistently than ever" (*Confessing the Faith*, p. 499-500).

Hall suggests that contemplating the very fact of our existence is a good place to begin reflecting theologically on our personal destiny. I think we all know this, but being Presbyterians, we need to have an academic's permission to trust our own intuitions. "That we are in the first place is astonishing," Hall says. "That we are such as we are, creatures of thought, will, and language bearers of memory, creators of art and music. . . . We will not be abandoned by the One who made us and breathed spirit into us and finally also became human in Jesus Christ . . . ."

No one, Hall says, ever improved on St. Paul, . . . "Nothing in creation—not even death—will separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ."

And so, because we live by faith and not sight, when we think about our personal destiny, because this is a matter of our faith not merely our theology, we all stand on level ground and we should listen to scripture, but also to our hearts and to one another.

I loved Kathleen Norris' essay on Heaven in her recent best seller, *Amazing Grace*: . . . "a foolish concept to be sure," she writes. And then Norris, who knows her way around a lot of theology, says that she loves the "utter democracy of the heavenly banquet," and describes a dream she once had, "a banquet table so long I could not see the end of it. Emily Dickinson, seated next to St. Therese of Lisieux, Soren Kierkegaard seated across

from them. I longed to hear the conversation. My grandparents were there, my aunts and uncles, my mother and father, family, friends, strangers. A whole raft of Dali Lamas, including the current one, and several infant Lamas-to-be. Seated not far from them was a good friend, a Benedictine monk. He was grousing about having to wear his habit for all eternity. There was much lively conversation, but it all sounded like singing and was profoundly joyful. I awoke with a sense of wonder at the grace of it all" (*Amazing Grace*, p. 367).

It is a mystery finally. While I do not discount anyone's personal experience, I confess that I am not persuaded by near-death testimonies of light and darkness, or long tunnels opening onto bright green meadows. The more concrete and objective the argument, the more I sense we are merely revealing our human need to live by knowledge and sight and not by faith.

That is the essence of a wonderful story Henri Nouwen told about twins having a conversation in the womb.

> "The sister said to her brother, 'I believe there is life after birth.' Her brother protested vehemently. 'No, no, this is all there is. This is a dark and cozy place, and we have nothing else to do but cling to the cord that feeds us.' The little girl insisted, 'There must be something else, a place with light where there is freedom to move.' She could not convince her twin brother.
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> After some silence, the sister said hesitantly, 'I have something else to say and I'm afraid you won't believe that, either, but I think there is a mother!' He shouted, 'What are you talking about? I have never seen a mother and neither have you. Who put that idea into your head? This place is all we have . . . ."
>
> The sister was quite overwhelmed. But she couldn't let go of her thought, and finally she said, 'Don't you feel these squeezes every once in a while? They're quite unpleasant and sometimes even painful.' 'Yes,' he answered. 'What's special about that?' 'Well,' the sister said, 'I think that these squeezes are there to get us ready for another place, much more beautiful than this, where we will see our mother face-to-face. Don't you think that's exciting?'" (Nouwen *op. cit.*, p. 19-20).

Finally, you and I decide to live as if this is all there is, or we decide, in faith that is childlike, to live as if we are finally and ultimately secure in God's love, which means free to live this life fully, joyfully, passionately.

It is no accident, I believe, that Jesus did not say very much about what will happen to us ultimately, but instead invites us to follow and put our trust and our lives in his hands.

Wendell Berry is a Kentucky farmer and a remarkable poet. Over the years, Berry has written a poem every Sunday afternoon after a walk around his farm or in the woods. He calls them "Sabbath Poems." Here is one of his latest ones.

Some Sunday afternoon, it may be,
you are sitting under your porch roof,
looking down through the trees
to the river, watching the rain. The circles
made by the raindrops' striking
expand, intersect, dissolve,

and suddenly (for you are getting on
now, and much of your life is memory)
the hands of the dead, who have been here
with you, rest upon you tenderly
as the rain rests shining
upon the leaves. And you think then

(for thought will come) of the strangeness
of the thought of Heaven, for now
you have imagined yourself there,
remembering with longing this
happiness, this rain. Sometimes here
we are there, and there is no death."

(*A Timbered Choir.* "The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997." 1996, V, p. 201).

"And there is no death."

"Do not let your hearts be troubled," Jesus said. "Believe in God. Believe also in me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places."

And the old man wrote, "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

"If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take."

Thanks be to God. Amen.